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ABSTRACT

A review of counseling services within Alberta Career Development and Employment is presented in this document. Strategic issues were identified, most of which occur in other vocational counseling organizations. The issues include: (1) adapting to organizational changes; (2) increasing linkages between counseling services; (3) re-defining counseling; (4) strategic planning; and (5) fiscal restraint. The four stages of the review process are described: background research and evaluation; formal review of counseling services; creation of task teams to refine results; and creation of a counseling policy unit. From the review process a model for counseling services was created which outlines a process to provide counseling services appropriate to the client. It includes three levels of counseling services: self-help; group; and individual. In the application of the strategic model a delivery system is outlined. Five critical recommendations of the review are included. From the recommendations six areas are identified for additional research and work: client needs identification; self-help materials; counselor skills and competencies; vocational testing and assessment; program evaluation; and priorities for counseling services. The report concludes that the review led to enhancement in services and emphasized the need for ongoing adjustments. (ABL)

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A REVIEW OF COUNSELLING SERVICES WITHIN ALBERTA CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

A presentation made to the 16th National Consultation on Vocational Counselling , Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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In recognition of the changes taking place in the labour market, Alberta Career Development and Employment undertook a major review of a province wide vocational and career counselling service. The intent of the review was to: (a) develop a process which would maximize involvement with all stakeholders, (b) identify a strategic model or design for counselling services, (c) identify specific applications of the model for delivery systems, and (d) develop a set of specific recommendations for further actions to be taken. The review process successfully achieved all of its' objectives, and also developed a process which ensured that the recommendations of the original review were followed up and examined in more detail. Through the process outlined, a large and complex area of service was examined in an effective and efficient manner. The review has led to enhancement in services, and has emphasized the need for ongoing adjustments.

A REVIEW OF COUNSELLING SERVICES WITHIN ALBERTA CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

Alberta Career Development and Employment provides a range of counselling services for adults accessing or adjusting to the provincial labour market. Historically, these were offered by a number of different and autonomous operations using a variety of approaches to counselling. In 1987, with an awareness of the changing labour market, the department began a review of its counselling services. The goal was to build upon the existing services and to ensure that services were adaptable and responsive to changes in the labour market

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Several critical issues were identified, but most were not unique to Career Development and Employment. Similar concerns occur in other vocational counselling organizations, particularly those that offer a range of services, or have several different counselling units. These issues include:

1. **Adapting to Organizational Changes:**

   Recent organizational changes brought previously autonomous counselling services together into a more integrated format.

2. **Increasing linkages between counselling services:**

   With these organizational changes, the counselling services would need more and stronger linkages between them. In addition, there would be a need for stronger coordination in policy development and operational planning. Formal communication and planning are critical for the effective and efficient use of counselling resources.

3. **Re-defining Counselling**:

   Professionals with different training and employment histories can see counselling in many different ways. The role and purpose of counselling can also vary among organizations serving diverse populations. With the integration of several different services, the term counselling had to be formally defined to ensure clarity.

4. **Strategic Planning**:

   Providing individual counselling is costly and staff intensive. Strategic planning is essential to keep a proactive emphasis and ensure that services reflect the goals, and objectives of the organization.

5. **Fiscal Restraint:**

   The next decade should continue to stress restraint on staffing and administrative costs within the government. As resources become more scarce, and demand for services remains high, the question of who we help and how we help them becomes more and more crucial.

REVIEW PROCESS

From the beginning, the department recognized that the success of the project depended on getting maximum involvement from all stakeholders. Wherever possible delivery staff would be involved in the review process. The four stages of the review included:

1. **Background research and evaluation:**

   The project began with the development of briefing papers on: current theories in vocational counselling; current and projected labour market trends; and similar programs and approaches in other jurisdictions across Canada. Next, interviews were conducted with staff to examine the current status of counselling within the department. A questionnaire was developed and counsellors from all service areas were interviewed. The results helped clarify the current status of the services, and identified the major concerns of counselling personnel.

2. **Formal Review of Counselling Services**

   A Steering committee was assembled from management and delivery staff. They identified: critical counselling issues within the department; possible responses; and policy recommendations related to the responses. The final report and recommendations were submitted to the Deputy Minister and the Senior Management Committee. This group reviewed and endorsed the recommendations, and requested that the broad recommendations be refined into more detailed policy and operational plans.

3. **The Task Teams**

   Six teams were each created to refine the results of the review. The recommendations had major implications for certain aspects of counselling (eg. client needs assessment, counsellor training and competencies, evaluation of counselling programs, etc.). The teams would produce reports that would serve as the groundwork for the detailed implementation plans.

4. **The Counselling Policy Unit**

   The Review identified a long term and ongoing need for the development of counselling policy. As a result, a unit was created to develop and coordinate counselling policy within the department.

REVIEW FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Review of Counselling Services:**

After the strategic issues were identified, a conceptual model was developed to facilitate change while still meeting the needs of the counselling service. The model would be compatible with existing service delivery systems, and complement other departmental services and programs for individuals. The findings are summarized as follows:

a) **Strategic Model for Counselling Services**:

The model outlines a process to provide counselling services appropriate to the needs of a client. In particular, it acknowledges that clients with significant difficulties in accessing or adjusting to the labour market have greater needs. The model also recognizes the limited resources of the department.

Traditionally, clients attempting to enter the labour market require more intensive resources and assistance than those who are employed and are trying to adjust or progress. Thus, there is a need to balance the client's needs and the available resources. The intensity of services and resources available to the client should increase as the client's labour market barriers increase. The three levels of counselling services which will be offered by Alberta Career Development and Employment are:

i Self-Help Services - These provide a comprehensive range of self directed career planning and job search materials. They are general enough for clients presenting a range of concerns, and will be available to all adult Albertans. At this level clients will work relatively independently, and on a per client basis, staff commitment will be fairly low.

ii Group Sessions - Generally, the group sessions will be open to all clients. Priorities will be reflected by the objectives, content and how often the service is offered. Those taking a group session can also use the self-help services. Staff will have more time to spend with each client at this level.

iii Individual Counselling Sessions - Clients accessing this level will have specific (and usually complex) barriers to the labour market. Clients receiving these services are getting the highest commitment of staff resources. Departmental priorities will be reflected by reserving at least some of the individual appointments for individuals that had certain barriers to accessing or adjusting to the labour market.

The department sees a wide range of clients, each with a unique set of concerns. The services must be flexible and diverse to assist the client, while simultaneously recognizing that the department has a limited amount of resources. The model links the intensity of the resources committed to a particular level of counselling services with the degree or severity of the labour market barrier faced by the client.

Some individuals can meet their needs with only a minimal amount of assistance from the department. An individual's difficulties may range from relatively straight foreword concerns such as a need for employment or career information to much more complex issues such as: lack of employable skills, systemic discrimination, etc.. For example, a client requiring labour market information can usually work relatively autonomously once the information is provided. Other clients have greater needs and require more intensive assistance, such as individual counselling (eg. a person recently disabled). The degree to which the client is involved in the labour market can be summarized as:

i Currently Inactive in the Labour Force but Desiring to Enter or Re-enter into Active Participation.

ii Government Support Required to Access or Adjust to the Labour Market.

iii Employed but Seeking Assistance with Labour Market Adjustment.

iv Self Sufficient or Employer Supported in Accessing or Adjusting to Labour Market.

Thus, clients whose labour market barriers are more intense would probably require more in-depth assistance, such as one-to-one counselling. Clients whose concerns were somewhat less complicated, but who still require a fairly intense service, will be assisted by group sessions. For those whose concerns are less intense, or who decide to work on their own, a range of self directed resources could be available to assist them.

b) **Application of the Strategic Model**

The delivery system for counselling includes:

i **Screening and Development of a Client Needs Profile**: Initially, data is gathered to determine the client's labour market barriers. The client requests service, his/her needs are clarified and may be documented, then, appropriate services or courses of actions are discussed with them. Clients whose needs cannot be met by the department are referred to appropriate external resources.

ii **Service Selection**: Based on the identified client needs (or their barriers to the labour market), the client is presented with a number of service options. These could include self directed, group, or individual counselling services. As the availability of resources is limited for all of these services, priority may be given to clients presenting certain types of labour market issues or barriers.

iii **Exit and/or referral**: At any point, in the delivery of counselling services, a client may exit the process or be referred to other appropriate departmental or external services.

iv **Follow-up/Evaluation**: The model proposes to meet client needs and departmental priorities. Therefore, regular program assessment and evaluation will occur.

c) Critical Recommendations of the Review

Some of the recommendations of the Review will have significant effects on counselling within the department. These include:

i The delivery of counselling services should reflect departmental priorities. This will normally be accomplished by identifying certain barriers to the labour market as priority concerns. Clients with these barriers may be given preference in accessing departmental counselling services.

ii A mechanism must be developed to provide accurate and up to date labour market information for both clients and counsellors

iii A complete range of self-directed materials should be developed to increase the client's self reliance in the process.

iv A formal needs identification process should be developed to identify, where necessary, the clients labour market barriers.

v A formal mechanism should be established to evaluate counselling services and to provide data for the setting of departmental priorities.

2. Recommendation Follow-up: Task Team Research Approach

From the five recommendations listed above, six areas were identified for additional research and work. Staff with specific expertise in these areas were assigned to corresponding task teams and in one case, an external specialist was involved. Each team was to research the area and develop policy recommendations which would serve as the foundation for operationalization. The areas examined were:

a) Client Needs Identification:

The team was asked to develop a simple, systematic method of identifying the client's needs and barriers to the labour market. The methodologies currently used in the department were seen as inadequate for this task. The team developed a three level model and identified possible methodologies.

b) Self Help Materials:

The overall model depends on the development of comprehensive self directed career planning and job search materials. The results should assist clients in becoming less reliant on the department for support. This approach is for those clients whose barriers and personal suitability would allow them to use the materials effectively. The team developed a conceptual framework for the materials and the Career Programs and Resources Branch will be developing a wide range of resources.

c) **Counsellor Skills and Competencies:**

The department offers several different services which require diverse skills, so a core set of competencies or educational requirements is difficult to identify. The team adopted a work activities perspective which focused on the actual work involved, as opposed to strictly educational or professional criteria. The type of competency or training required for each activity would be identified later. This approach was seen as more competency based and less threatening to staff. A private consulting firm was retained to identify and quantify the actual work taking place. The project is underway and is developing a work activities list for all of the department's counselling services. Over one hundred staff will be interviewed in both rural and urban centres throughout the province. The completed work activities schedule will be used to plan and develop staff training.

d) **Vocational Testing and Assessment**:

While developing a method to identify client's needs, the team saw testing as a distinct area requiring further policy development. Consequently, an additional team was created and staff with appropriate expertise were assembled to review testing. They initiated a series of detailed policies regarding the classification and use of tests. In addition, they proposed a formal process to review the instruments currently in use, and to identify new resources. This process has now been developed and is in operation.

e) **Program Evaluation**:

For counselling services (often seen as "soft"), it is critical to establish meaningful measurable criteria for success. Before the team could do this, they needed a clear statement of the objectives and priorities for counselling. This statement was not available in a form useful to the team, but should be completed in the next few months. Work in this area will continue.

f) **Priorities for Counselling Services**:

The review stated that counselling services must reflect departmental and labour market priorities. As this task required an understanding of the whole model, the Steering Committee proceeded with it themselves. The group had difficulty defining the parameters, and could not ignore other departmental services. As this was beyond the mandate of the review, the task was put on hold. Another group was established to develop a planning and priority setting process for the department. Priorities for the counselling will fall out of this larger process.

The teams effectively focussed the expertise of departmental specialists, and offered many staff an opportunity to be involved, either actively, or by providing input. The teams reviewed materials and developed policies for delivering counselling services. In addition to their achievements, the groups suggested that the department be aware of all current developments in counselling, and that an ongoing process be established to ensure this. As standing committees were not seen as time efficient or desirable, it was recommended that a specialized position in counselling policy be created.

3. Counselling Policy Unit

Early in 1989 a counselling policy unit was created and a coordinator recruited. This area will follow-up on any outstanding activities or issues from the counselling review, but its primary role is to research and develop policy for departmental counselling services.

CONCLUSIONS

Alberta Career Development and Employment's review of counselling services faced many challenges. It was more complex and time consuming than originally anticipated. Yet, the process has been a catalyst for change within the organization as a whole. Many of the interested parties participated in the review, which helped to increase the acceptance of the report and recommendations.

Overall, the process generated a thorough examination of a complicated topic in an effective and efficient manner. The review has led to enhancement in services, and has emphasized the need for ongoing adjustments.

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